PHILOSOPHICAL PSYCHOLOGY

BOOK REVIEW

**Consciousness and its place in epistemology**

**The Epistemic Role of Consciousness**, by Declan Smithies, Oxford University Press, 2019 / 2022, 456 pp., $99.00 / $29.95 (Hardcover / Paperback), ISBN 9780199917662 / 9780197680001

Although phenomenal consciousness strikes many as quite mysterious, many think that it must also be quite significant. Some have urged, for example, that consciousness is the ground of moral value—that creatures matter because they can be in conscious states (e.g., Shepherd, 2018). In his magisterial new book, *The Epistemic Role of Consciousness*, Declan Smithies argues that consciousness is the ground of our epistemic capacities. On Smithies’ view, it is because we possess phenomenal experience that we can form justified beliefs, and thus have knowledge, about the world.

Smithies’ book is remarkable. It is pound for pound (the hardcover version is heavy!) one of the most densely argued books that I have recently encountered. It is meticulously researched, carefully presented, and wonderfully clever. Smithies throughout carefully lays out definition after definition, providing detailed arguments, and anticipating objections. Anyone interested in philosophy of mind, epistemology, and especially the intersection of those areas will profit from it.

The book is divided into two parts. The first half develops Smithies’ views about the nature of consciousness and its role in the mind, while the second half focuses on why and how epistemic principles reveal that consciousness grounds justification and knowledge. Smithies’ main goal is to develop and defend an ambitious form of evidentialist internalism, a position that he calls *phenomenal accessibilism*, which combines *phenomenal mentalism*—the view that the epistemic justification a mental state provides is determined by its phenomenal features—and *accessiblism*—the view that one is always able to know what degree of epistemic justification one enjoys.

Phenomenal accessibilism fits well with a picture of the mind once popular in the history of philosophy, on which all personal-levelmental states are conscious. But Smithies acknowledges that most in cognitive science today agree that mental representations, including both perception and thought, often occur outside of consciousness. Smithies discusses the pathological condition known as blindsight, in which persons with damage to the visual cortex often report not seeing items in their environment, though they nonetheless can discriminate those stimuli. A standard interpretation of these and similar results is that such individuals perceive, but do not consciously perceive, those stimuli. And it might seem reasonable to think, as I and others have proposed, that nonconscious perception provides justification for beliefs about those stimuli as well (e.g., Berger, Nanay, & Quilty Dunn, 2018; Jenkin, 2020).

Smithies argues, however, that nonconscious perception has no epistemic import. One might suppose that a promising avenue to this conclusion would be to investigate how consciousness operates psychologically in the mind. And there are many theories of consciousness, many of which hold that it underwrites complex mental functions. According to the well-known global-workspace theory, for example, it is consciousness that makes perceptual states available for the control of action. So, it might seem that consciousness likewise generates the epistemic powers of mental states. But the case is far less clear on other theories of consciousness. On so-called higher-order theories, conscious states are simply states we are suitably aware of ourselves as being in—and it is not obvious why the fact that one is not aware of being in a perceptual state would mean that the state cannot play an epistemic role.

Crucially, Smithies argues that nonconscious perceptual states would not justify belief even if they were functionally identical to their conscious counterparts. In Chapter 1 (“Consciousness”), Smithies instructs us to “put consciousness first”—to ask about its conceptual connections to epistemic or other normative domains *before* asking about its underlying metaphysical nature. He illustrates the putative conceptual connection between consciousness and justification by appeal to the conceivability of philosophical zombies, creatures that are behaviorally or functionally identical to those of us with consciousness but who lack the phenomenal aspects of mentality. Intuitively, Smithies urges, zombies are not justified in holding beliefs about the world precisely because their perceptual experiences lack the phenomenal features that render our familiar experiences justificatory.

In Chapter 2 (“Representation”), Smithies develops his account of the relevant phenomenal features by turning to issues about the nature of mental representation. He argues that while some have proposed that all mental representation is grounded in consciousness, in fact only cognitive representation, the kind that can justify and be justified, is explained in terms of consciousness. Chapter 3 (“Perception”) then advances a kind of representationalism about the phenomenal character of perceptual experience, on which experiences present their contents with a special kind of presentational force. On Smithies’ view, a visual experience of a red cube has a distinctive content and force in virtue of which it seems to be true that there is a red cube present. And this phenomenal character explains why one’s experience justifies and why one is in a position to know that one’s experience justifies belief in the red cube’s presence.

Considerations of imagined phenomena such as zombies may not appeal to those more experimentally minded readers, who often regard such denizens of thought experiments as inconceivable or irrelevant to debates about the nature of consciousness. And even if zombies were conceivable, one might maintain that nonconscious perception can justify beliefs because it exhibits a functional analogue of presentational force that need not involve phenomenology (see Berger 2020; Howell 2020).

Smithies does not, however, rely on intuition alone. Rather, he provides many arguments against the view that nonconscious perception can be justificatory, including in actual cases of nonconscious perception such as blindsight. He observes, for example, that individuals with blindsight would seem not to form beliefs about what they nonconsciously perceive. Since they often report consciously feeling as though they are guessing about what they nonconsciously perceive, individuals with blindsight are, Smithies suggests, akin to clairvoyants who make accurate, though unjustified, premonitions about the future. But since withholding belief about what one has justification to believe would be irrational, and since people with blindsight are not irrational, nonconscious perception cannot provide justification.

There may be ways to resist Smithies’ arguments, such as maintaining that people with blindsight are often in situations of blameless irrationality wherein conscious perception justifies certain—namely, conscious—beliefs, but nonconscious perception may justify conflicting *nonconscious* beliefs (e.g., Berger, 2020). But, as is the case with many potential objections to his views, Smithies anticipates such replies by arguing that blindsight is a visual (as opposed to a cognitive) deficit. And in Chapter 4 (“Cognition”), he develops a view of belief on which there can be no relevantly nonconscious thought because genuine beliefs (as opposed to mere subdoxastic states) are individuated by their dispositions to cause conscious judgments. Whatever is the right way to go, Smithies’ penetrating arguments may require us to rethink our mental and epistemic situations.

In Chapters 6 (“Mentalism”), 7 (“Accessibilism”), and 8 (“Reflection”), Smithies offers many (many!) interlocking arguments in favor of his phenomenal accessibilism not from considerations of the nature of the mind *per se*, but from general epistemic principles. Again, phenomenal accessibilism is the view that a state’s epistemic status is determined by its phenomenal features and that one is always in a position to know one’s degree of epistemic justification. And Smithies argues, for example, that this view presents the best account of various cases and skeptical challenges, such as the well-known “new” evil-demon problem, which is often posed as a challenge to externalist theories of justification. Assuming your deceived phenomenal duplicate has the same justification to believe in the external world as you do, Smithies proposes that the best explanation is that justification depends on one’s phenomenal states alone.

The remainder of the book— Chapter 9 (“Epistemic Akrasia”), Chapter 10 (“Higher-Order Evidence”), Chapter 11 (“Luminosity”), and Chapter 12 (“Seemings”)—explains how the proposed view clarifies our thinking about various interconnected issues in recent debates in epistemology. Perhaps Smithies’ central problem with the proposal that nonconscious perception could be justificatory is that it would put individuals in positions of so-called epistemic akrasia, wherein they would be justified in believing Moore-paradoxical claims of the form: “I see a stimulus but I do not have justification to believe that I see a stimulus.” But since rationality prohibits believing such things, nonconscious perception cannot play an epistemic role. Moreover, the luminosity of our mental contents, which phenomenal accessibilism clarifies and explains, reveals why this is so.

Reading the book, I admit that I sometimes felt a bit unsure about how Smithies understands rationality in general, and thus why it cannot countenance mild cases of inconsistency and incoherence such as akrasia. As Smithies notes, some have recently defended the rationality of epistemic akrasia in certain cases, such as when one has misleading higher-order evidence about what one’s evidence supports. But Smithies’ complex view offers many points of contact. He argues that there are many general epistemic principles, such as the fact that ideal rationality demands that upon reflection we be able to cohere our conscious states, which support phenomenal accessibilism.

Although the first part of the volume ostensibly offers independent accounts of the mind and consciousness, one concern is that it sometimes seems as though Smithies’ epistemology drives his metaphysics. Chapter 5 (“Introspection”), for example, develops what he calls the *simple* view of introspection, on which being in a conscious state *ipso facto* provides justification for believing that one is in it. Such a view plainly seems to reinforce, or at least fit with, accessibilism. But there is a wealth of evidence that introspection is often in error: dental patients sometimes claim to feel pain in places where the relevant nerves are dead, removed, or anaesthetized—suggesting that anxiety causes introspection to mischaracterize the sensation of the vibrating drill as painful (see, e.g., Rosenthal, 2005, p. 127). Perhaps, then, we should settle how the mind (in this case, introspection) works *first*, before asking about its ramifications for epistemology. It may turn out that we are not always able to know what epistemic justification we have—and, indeed, that we lack knowledge of the external world altogether. Smithies does foresee such objections too, arguing that the fact that introspective beliefs are fallible is compatible with the infallibility of introspective justification. But whether or not Smithies is wrong on any particulars, his general approach may rankle those who are keen to keep separate their metaphysics and epistemology.

In any case, this brief review cannot do justice to the depth of Smithies’ discussion. His arguments are rich, compelling, and challenging. One is well justified in engaging with them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Jacob Berger

*Department of Philosophy, Lycoming College, Williamsport PA*

*Email: berger@lycoming.edu*

**References**

Berger, J. (2020). “Perceptual Consciousness Plays No Epistemic Role,” *Philosophical*

*Issues*30(1): 7-23.

Berger, J., Nanay, B. & Quilty-Dunn, J. (2018). “Unconscious Perceptual Justification,”

*Inquiry* 61(5- 6): 569-589Bottom of Form

Jenkin, Z. (2020). “The Epistemic Role of Core Cognition,” *Philosophical Review* 129(2): 251-

298.

Howell, R. (2020). “Review of The Epistemic Role of Consciousness by Declan Smithies,”

*Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* website: <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-epistemic-

role-of-consciousness/>.

Rosenthal, D. (2005). Consciousness and Mind. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Shepherd, J. (2018). Consciousness and Moral Status. Oxon: Routledge.

1. I thank Declan Smithies, John Whelan, and Douglas Young for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)